

What East Europeans Really Think About the West

By JIRI PEHE

The admission of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland into NATO and the European Union seems to be just a matter of time. The three countries' politicians are actively lobbying for membership in both organizations, and Western politicians, after initial reluctance, are now debating *when* the three states should join rather than *whether* they should join. But nobody seems to be paying attention to what the people of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic think about the issue.

A number of respected polling agencies, including Gallup, Center for Empirical Research, and Institute for Public Opinion Research, report that Central European opinion is divided. Surveys—which it must be remembered only offer a snapshot of opinion—show that some 80% of Poles support EU membership and more than 80% support NATO membership. But public opinion, media discussions and domestic political realities in the Czech Republic and Hungary suggest that support for membership in these Western bodies is tentative at best.

In the Czech Republic, support for EU membership has dropped to about 50%, with the remainder of respondents undecided or against joining the EU. Only about one-third of Czechs are in favor of joining NATO, one-third are either tentatively in favor or tentatively against, and one-third are opposed to membership. The situation in Hungary is similar. About 45% of Hungarians support EU membership, while the rest are either undecided or against it. Only 40% of Hungarians are in favor of joining NATO, while the rest have either a neutral view or are against it.

What explains this divergence of opinion between Poland and the other two countries? For one thing, Poles seem much more aware than the Czechs and Hungarians of the security benefits of joining NATO and, to some extent, also the EU. Poland is the only one of the three countries that has a common border with Russia, via the Kalinigrad enclave, and a long border with Belarus, which has essentially become a geopolitical extension of Russia through a recently signed treaty. And given Poland's history of struggles with Russians and Germans, being anchored in NATO and the EU would clearly be reassuring.

Poles favor EU membership because they see more benefits than costs. Greater European involvement in Polish agriculture, for instance, would bring badly needed modernization. And Poland, unlike the Czech Republic and Hungary, has a coastline with several large ports that could benefit from being part of the EU trade bloc. Although Poland's 6% growth rate is among the highest in the post-Communist world, the country still has a lower per capita GDP than the Czech Republic or Hungary; EU membership could help in this direction as well.

Both Czechs and Hungarians seem to be

much less concerned than Poles about the security benefits of joining NATO and the EU, mainly because the two countries are in a more comfortable security position and don't share Poland's history of invasion. Czechs and Hungarians believe that given Russia's internal problems, the threat of confrontation with Russia in the near future is minimal. The opinion polls reflect this.

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Austria is not a member of NATO and is reluctant to join. For both countries, NATO membership would bring the symbolic value of reintegration with the West, of which they had culturally been a part for hundreds of years before the Communist era. However, the value of such symbolism has been decreasing; NATO has been putting off a decision on admitting the two countries, while the Czechs and Hungarians have reintegrated with the West in many other areas.

Reasons for lukewarm attitudes in both countries toward the EU are more complex. Internal political and media discussions indicate that many Hungarians feel that, despite their role in bringing down communism in Central Europe and starting economic reforms before any other East European country, they have been left in the EU waiting room for too long. Hungary is a predominantly rural country, with a relatively efficient agriculture sector, whose farmers are not comfortable with the prospect of facing open competition from EU farmers. In both Hungary and the Czech Republic, no real discussion of benefits and disadvantages tied to joining the EU has started.

The Czechs have apparently taken to heart some of the liberal views promoted by Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus, who, although striving for EU membership, likes to criticize the union's economic and political pretensions. A lack of a domestic discussion about the pros and cons of EU membership is also partly responsible for Czechs' lack of interest. Moreover, the good performance of the country's economy, combined with its relatively high living standards, has generated suggestions that the Czech Republic may be better off outside the EU.

While Polish politicians have not seriously raised the possibility of holding referendums on EU and NATO membership, leading Czech politicians from both the coalition and the opposition parties now argue that a plebiscite on EU membership will be necessary because joining the EU involves giving up parts of national sovereignty. In Hungary, too, the government has advocated a referendum on EU membership. Therefore, both countries, when officially offered membership, are likely to engage in the kind of extensive prerferendum debates that took place in Austria, Norway, Finland and Sweden before their plebiscites on joining. The main—and for the EU most disturbing—difference is that support for EU membership in both Hungary and the Czech Republic is currently lower than it was in Austria, Finland and Sweden before the referendum debates got under way.

The outcome of referendums on the two countries' NATO membership is also uncertain. Until the June parliamentary elections, the Czech ruling coalition, which is opposed to holding a referendum on NATO membership, had a majority of parliamentary seats and could have approved membership in the parliament without holding a plebiscite. However, the minority government is currently on the defensive; with the opposition parties either opposed to NATO membership or demanding a referendum. At the moment, the results of such a referendum are uncertain.

In Hungary, the ruling Socialists have indicated they may demand a referendum on NATO membership. The outcome of a referendum there too is difficult to predict.

What is certain, however, is that West and Central European politicians, in discussing EU and NATO membership, should begin to pay attention to the domestic political realities of prospective Central European member states. Politicians must not only talk among themselves, but explain to the public the benefits and costs of membership. Unless that happens, both NATO and the EU could be surprised and embarrassed, should their offers of membership be voted down by the people whose views have so far been more or less ignored.

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